

Outsiders Looking In by Genevie

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Summary:

Before the demogorgon, there was Lonnie.

A series of Jonathan-centric snapshots.

Outsiders Looking In

Jonathan stands perfectly still, a fawn in Lonnie's headlights. There's a welt on his arm, pink and swollen and angry, hot like a fire, throbbing in tune with his own rapid heartbeat. He can see the lighter that hit him on the floor a few feet to his right, and he can hardly believe that something so small is capable of causing this much pain.

Lonnie shifts on the couch, and he looks at Jonathan, and he says, "I told you to stay out of my face when I'm busy, didn't I?" like whipping a lighter at an eight-year-old is fair punishment for him standing in front of the television and saying, *dad, look at these photos I took of a blue jay out back.* "And bring me back my lighter before you run off to sulk."

After putting the polaroids in his back pocket, Jonathan collects the lighter and just stands there, holding it in his clenched fist. Defiant. The David to his father's Goliath. He fantasises about throwing it at Lonnie's head, about hitting him square between the eyes, about leaving a mark larger and angrier than the one on his own arm.

That is a Lonnie thing to do, though, and Jonathan is not a Lonnie. He puts the lighter on the coffee table, beside the overflowing ashtray, and, ignoring Lonnie's mumbling about why he couldn't have shown the same interest in trying out for the baseball team as he does in photography, he retreats to his bedroom for the rest of the afternoon.



At first, Joyce makes excuses for him.

Your father's just tired, she'll say, or, *He's never been a very affectionate person.* Jonathan can easily call to mind the sound of her voice telling him that Lonnie loves him, but that small, simple-sounding word, *love*, seems so strange when he tries to hear it in his father's voice. Like it's stolen from another language.

One night, he asks her why she doesn't just divorce him, and she tells

him that she can't. She simply can't.

Gradually, she shifts to saying things like, *You should try talking to him*, and then to, *I'll talk to him*, and finally to, *I can't control what he does, Jonathan*, in a voice so tired and apologetic and sad that he stops speaking to her about Lonnie altogether.

In the future, he will trace his own disinclination towards reaching out to others back to this moment, because it is here when he convinces himself that by being in pain, he is causing pain to other people. And he doesn't want to do that. He can learn to take care of himself.

♦ ♦ ♦

Lonnie never wanted a second child. Hell, he didn't really want the first one, either, but having Jonathan was like checking off an item on the list of Adult Things All Men Should Do If They Want To Be Considered True Men. He knocked a girl up—give the man a pat the on the back. He produced a boy—give him a cigar, too. The latter becomes his main bragging point when taking about Will. He'll say things like, *I'm two for two*, as if passing on his Y chromosome is a measure of his masculinity; as if that's what matters to him most.

At five years old, Will is, to Lonnie, a pussy, a little girl, a faggot. He retreats into himself, plays alone, develops an affinity for hiding in small places—inside of cupboards and boxes and drawers, within the tiny pockets of space in packed closets, underneath beds, behind furniture shoved into corners. Jonathan can't fit into these places with him so he'll sit nearby. Sometimes they'll listen to music together. Other times, they'll talk until Lonnie tells them to shut up because they're giving him a headache. Usually, though, they just sit in silence because Will is so used to being criticised that he doesn't like to speak very much.

Jonathan takes to positioning himself between Lonnie and Will like a shield, absorbing the spray of bullets that fires out almost every damned time Lonnie opens his mouth. "You shouldn't listen to him," he says when they're alone again, but Will is too young to understand that there are good fathers and bad fathers; that adults can be petty and cruel and wrong; that none of Lonnie's outbursts are his fault. He

just wants his dad to stop being mean to him, and no matter what Jonathan tries, his kindness is never enough to convince Will that he deserves better.

♦ ♦ ♦

At twelve, Jonathan stops believing that monsters can be slain. At thirteen, he runs away from home. Only for a few hours, until he realises that as little as he can tolerate Lonnie, he can stand the thought of his mother and his little brother being alone with him even less.

At fourteen, he's reminded that monsters are really just cowards.

Tension bursts against him like steam the moment he opens the door to Joyce's car. Her shoulders are set in a straight line and her elbows jut out at sharp angles. She's holding the steering wheel so tight that her knuckles are bone-pale, and she's only fractionally attentive while asking him about his day. "Will's going home with the Wheelers," she says as they pass the elementary school. "I asked Karen to pick him up."

He asks her why but she doesn't answer.

When they're about a half mile from the house, she pulls over into the gas station parking lot and turns away, staring out through the driver's side window, silent. Jonathan doesn't know what to do, what to say. He picks at the sleeve of his sweatshirt, working his fingers into the hole at the edge of the cuff.

Joyce lets out one heavy breath. Another follows quickly afterwards. Then she shatters right there in the car, and Jonathan feels her pain pierce him like shrapnel through his skin. With each hitched breath and every sob she apologises, and he wishes that there was enough room in the car to be able to give her a hug. Instead, he takes her hand. She squeezes it, hard, and says, "Your father left. You want to know how I found out, Jonathan? He called me from a damned payphone halfway to Indianapolis."

Immediately, he feels conflicted. This is, to him, great news; something to celebrate. But he can't be happy when Joyce is this

upset, especially when he can't understand what's wrong. Lonnie never spared her from criticism, or made any attempts to bridge the ever-growing distance between them. He didn't help around the house, not even to clean up after himself. He didn't buy her anything for her birthday, or for Christmas, or for their anniversary. Never took her anywhere nice. Never did anything nice. And in return, Joyce had given all of her love to her boys. Lonnie was just a presence in the Byers home; someone to serve but not someone to need, or to care about, or to want around. Not someone to miss.

"Things are going to be hard for a while," she says, still sounding like she thinks she has something to apologise for. "We're going to have to cut back on a lot." But Jonathan doesn't care. He'll give up everything—his music, his photography, whatever. He'll get a job. He'll help out more around the house. Anything. It doesn't matter. Lonnie leaving is like a scab lifting from his family, and he can't wait to see how well they'll heal.

♦ ♦ ♦

This is what he finds under the scab:

Will makes friends but they pick on him, sometimes, and because Lonnie had spent years making him feel worthless, he doesn't stand up for himself, taking the teasing like it's nothing—like it doesn't make him wonder if he'll ever be right enough to belong anywhere.

Joyce becomes more anxious, more gaunt, more unavailable. There are times when she is barely present, wide-eyed and breathing heavy, slowly shutting down while work and bills and responsibilities descend on her with the fury of an avalanche.

Jonathan still doesn't like relying on other people, can't really stand being around anyone besides his family for too long. And even with them, he finds himself shrinking away. Both Will and Joyce can read him like he's a sheet of paper and his mood is written all over his body in large, black letters. He is the big brother, though; the eldest son. He doesn't ever want to concern them.

♦ ♦ ♦

When he gets his first real job, he hands his first real paycheque to Joyce who stares at it like it's written in a code she can't decipher. "You should get yourself something nice," she says, trying to hand it back to him, but he refuses until, eventually, she gives in, sliding it into her purse with a roll of her eyes and a frustrated-sounding, *Jonathan...*

At the end of her shift, she comes home looking more energised than usual, more happy. "I got you something," she says, and she holds out a flimsy plastic shopping bag through which he can easily read the word *Pentax*. His heart somehow manages to rise and to sink at precisely the same moment.

"Mom, that money was for helping out around the house."

Joyce smiles and squeezes his jaw. "Seeing you and Will happy is what helps me out *Jonathan*," and what can he say to that? He pulls the camera out of the bag, flipping the box in his hands. "It's the model you were looking at, right? The MX? I only kind of remember you talking about it, but I wrote it down just in case, and..."

"I can't believe you did this."

"I can't believe you were going to give me your first paycheque. What were you thinking?"

He was thinking that his paycheques could buy her a shift off from work once a month or something, maybe; that she could put the money to better use than he would; that he could begin chipping away at the massive debt he owes her for being so quick and so willing to make sacrifices for him and for Will.

He was thinking that he wanted to make her smile in exactly the same way she's smiling at him now, with excitement and pride and relief brimming her eyes.

"Nothing," he says. "Just, I don't know. That I'm glad you're my mom."

♦ ♦ ♦

He takes pictures of everything. Joyce and Will, the house, the yard.

Leaves swirling on the ground, people milling in front of the movie theatre when something new premieres. Ice hanging from the trees like diamonds, sparkling in the sunlight. Birds silhouetted against the coming night. Strangers going about their business, oblivious that they're being photographed.

It's easier to view the world in frozen frames—in single moments carefully chosen. There are details he can't see until they're committed to film, and he loses himself to his exploration of the meanings of these moments and what they say about the world and his place within it.

This is the good kind of lost. The kind that makes him feel that maybe, just maybe, he is beginning to find himself.

♦ ♦ ♦

It's just one shift, he thinks. We need the money, he thinks. Will will be fine, he thinks.

Will is not fine. Will is gone.

Jonathan searches for him through the lens of his camera, always taking pictures, always seeking the secrets of the details, hoping beyond hope that they'll lead him to his brother. But he doesn't find Will. He finds Nancy.

Every click of his camera feels wrong, invasive. But also enlightening. It's like the Harrington house is an entirely different world, separate from his own, somewhere where little brothers don't bear patchworks of scars over their hearts, or disappear into the ether; where mothers aren't flickering into and out of existence; where money is a reliable thing, tucked into thick wallets, collecting interest in bank accounts.

They have a goddamned inground pool.

He wonders what Steve and his friends worry about; wonders how their brand of freedom feels. He wonders in particular over Nancy, who seems as out of place as he does yet who moves around the pool like she is a siren and it is her lake; like she's aware of the power she wields but isn't sure how to put it to use.

Photo after photo, on the deck, inside of the pool, in Steve's room, this doesn't change. There is something about Nancy he needs to have on film.

♦ ♦ ♦

It's Barb's picture that Nancy cares about.

Jonathan pores over it with her, trying to distinguish the features of the creature on the right. Like this, they become a team, she with her gumption, he with his gun. Monster Hunters. It all seems so absurd, not just for the fact that he is suddenly near the centre of her radar, but also for the way that he feels like he can open up around her. He tells her about things like the time that Lonnie made him kill a rabbit, and she affirms that his father is a piece of shit. Which is nice for more reasons than the validation it provides.

When later she sits beside him with a pack of ice, he lets her hold it to his face even though the handcuffs on his wrist don't entirely impede him from doing it himself. She has a strange look in her eye that he can't read, and he wishes he had his camera with him so that he could extract this one final secret from her presence on his film.

♦ ♦ ♦

Barb is dead.

The demogorgon is slain.

Eleven is gone.

Will is home.

Nancy finds her moorings and Jonathan drifts away from her, untethered.

The story continues from here.

♦ ♦ ♦

When Lonnie visits Will in the hospital, both Joyce and Jonathan remain in the room like soldiers, tongues tensed against the roofs of

their mouths, ready to be fired at the first sign of aggression. Hopper is there too, standing by the door, and this pisses Lonnie off more than anything. “Why’s the pig here?” he asks, unashamed. “Do you two have something going on?”

Joyce cuts him a glare so sharp it could slice through rock. “You’re here for Will, Lonnie. Remember?”

He doesn’t have much to say, and Jonathan wonders, briefly, if he wouldn’t have preferred the money from suing the quarry. Not even Lonnie is horrible enough to want his children dead, though. He just wants them different.

Instead of asking Will how he’s doing, Lonnie starts talking about self-defense lessons, insisting that Will needs to be stronger. Will nods along, pretending to agree, but when Joyce asks him later if she should set something up for him, he tells her no. That he has other things he wants to do first; that he wanted to get rid of Lonnie so that it’d be just them, again. His family.

♦♦♦

Nancy comes by once, too, but it isn’t to see Will. She takes Jonathan for a walk out behind the hospital, and they talk about how their brothers are doing, how they themselves are coping. Once they’re far enough away that they’re the only people around, she moves in front of him, so close that he can feel her breath on his chin, and she rises up on her toes to graze her lips against his, gentle, testing.

His entire body is flush with heat, trembling. Goosebumps rise up his arms and he wonders if Nancy’s own flesh is prickling under her clothes, too. Leaning forwards, he opens his mouth, hovering his lips over hers, unsure of where to land.

She crashes into him. Suddenly, her hands are in his hair and her tongue is edging the inside of his upper lip, and he isn’t sure what, exactly, is happening here but he decides that he likes the way her secrets taste better than he likes seeing them on film.

When she pulls away, her face is flushed, and her lips are swollen and pink, and he thinks that she’s never looked more beautiful.

“What was that about?” he asks.

“I thought I felt a spark earlier.”

“Do you still feel it?”

“Maybe,” she says, smiling.

They walk back to the hospital together without once mentioning the kiss.

♦ ♦ ♦

There is no clearing the house of the demogorgon's presence. Even after all the wallpaper has been stripped down, and all the carpeting has been torn away, and the hole in the wall has been patched up so well that there isn't even a seam in the plaster, Jonathan knows that darkness looms in the same space on a different dimension.

It doesn't matter that the monster is dead. Its ghost still presses through the walls like they're made of fabric. Its shadows still stretch long and slender down the hallway at night. The memory of it still draws Jonathan's face, and Joyce's face, and Will's face taught with nervousness even when the sun is shining through the windows and everything else is all right.

He's felt this way before. Not for a while—not since Lonnie left—but he knows that this isn't something they'll grow out of; knows that even if they move halfway across the damned world the demogorgon will still cling to them in inextricable ways, its claws leaving scars deep in their subconscious.

There is only room for so much pain, though. Old scars are already beginning to fade. Some nights, Jonathan wakes up to find Will standing in his doorway, seeking comfort in ways which Lonnie had once shamed out of him by saying shit like, *For fuck's sake, Will, men don't cry like little girls. We suck it up and we deal.* And in turn, Jonathan tells Will about seeing the demogorgon, about how he sometimes can't sleep at night either, about how more than a few times he's spent hours walking around Hawkins because he can't bear to be in the house when Will and Joyce are elsewhere.

They were Lonnie's boys, once; unsure, withdrawn. Outsiders looking into a world they were told, in ways both direct and indirect, that they weren't suited for. Now they are themselves, young men in their own rights, learning that there is strength in vulnerability and that they can't slay their monsters alone, but they can—they will—survive them together.